

Starting a 'digital diet' in the New Year can help lose the weight you can't see

by Blog Admin

January 10, 2012

*The New Year is classically a time for resolutions and diets, and this year might be the time to rethink our digital consumption. Ahead of his LSE lecture tonight, renowned journalist **Daniel Sieberg** offers timely advice for technology gluttons everywhere, explaining how best to ditch the digital dependency, take back control of your life, restore real relationships, and use technology in a healthier way.*



Let's collectively hit the virtual pause button for a minute and consider what our digital lives have become. Many of us spend our days with our head in the high-tech "clouds." Our peripheral vision, once used while walking to sense approaching enemies, has today given way to glancing up and down, our eyes darting away from our internet portals just long enough to flash an accusatory glance at someone and avoid a collision. We text and drive like it's a matter of life and death, which, I'm sorry to report, it is. And then there's that nagging voice telling us that despite our unprecedented access to technology that allows us to connect to the outside world and the people we love, we sometimes feel more overwhelmed and, ironically, disconnected, than ever before. While it's easy to blame "all this technology" for taking us away from the people and stuff we love, the truth is that we're often our own worst enemy. As a quick barometer of your digital life, ask yourself these questions:

- Do you sometimes feel the urge to pull out your smartphone while someone else is making a point in conversation?
- Have you ever realized that you were texting or reading email while your child was telling you about her day at school and later couldn't remember any details from her story?
- Have you ever felt that something hasn't really happened until you post it online?
- Do you feel anxious if you're offline for any length of time?
- Does a ringing/vibrating cell phone interrupt and trump everything else, including your dinner date?

I'm guessing you grudgingly admitted a "yes" to at least one or two of these e-sins. I know, because I've been there. Some days, I am there. I've covered technology for several television networks over the past decade but in late 2009 while visiting family and friends over the holidays I realized that it had got the best of me: despite my enthusiastic embrace of the e-world, I had lost touch with the people I cared about in real life.

But I've spent the past couple of years trying to streamline my digital intake, improve my relationships, and make technology work for me, not the other way around. I love technology but at some point it got the best of me. I'm not perfect, but I've discovered the benefits of better tech management. I've also worked to create a four-step plan that works on a broader—and sliding—scale. It's not one size fits all. Rather it's about illuminating our tech demands and dependence in the short term and instilling an over-arching awareness and strategy for the long term. (Full disclosure: I now work for Google in New York but it's a company that believes in a healthy working environment and that was extremely important to me before agreeing to the job.)

My Digital Diet does begin with a detox in the Re:Think stage (step 1). But it's brief, lasting only a day or two and it's meant to instill awareness about what you've been missing not torture you. Every so often it's good to have a mini cleanse. Flush out those ones and zeroes. Then it's time to Re:Boot (step 2) by giving your doodads and logins a hard look with your Virtual Weight Index. Your VWI is based on a formula that measures the weight you can't see: all the emails and texts and social networks and phone calls and other interruption-based services that you carry around every day. It assigns a numeric value to all the technology in your life with your score representing your tech dependence. The point is to illustrate—in black and white—where your time is being spent.



Credit: JD Hancock (Creative Commons BY)

As you begin to Re:Connect (step 3) it's important to be aware, and vigilant, about your e-day: in other words, the times of day when you begin your immersion in the connected world. Consider when it starts, and, just as importantly, when it ends. Those company devices that now seem to be standard issue along with a security ID have gone from being a nifty distraction to an invisible tether. My advice is to set boundaries for when people can expect to hear from you. If you don't do it, no one else will. Don't respond to work emails at 2 a.m. Begin your e-day with a cup of tea sans gadgets and end it by charging them in the kitchen, not near your bed. During Re: Connect, it's also important to take time to re-establish friendships that have drifted online or off the grid in the past year. Call friends and make dates instead of just "liking" a friend's photo on a social. Re-discover the art of conversation.

As we move into the final phase of the Digital Diet, Re:Vitalize (step 4), there are several steps that can help you gain that foundation of strength for you future digital life. There are lots of technologies, beyond the ones we use for communication, that can benefit your overall well-being. Sometimes it's about "outsourcing self-control," like with apps that prevent you from texting while driving. Or it's about discovering what you actually spend time on when you're online through programs like [RescueTime](#), which breaks down exactly where all those computer minutes go (the average person flips through 40 websites a day) or limits your online time. It could even be something as simple as downloading Scrabble or a brainteaser game for your smartphone or getting in shape with something like the Wii Fit.

Indeed, the diet about seeing your technology in a whole new light. Loving it again, not wanting to put it in a blender. Going on a Digital Diet is also about reconnecting with people. Tucking your child in with a bedtime story not worrying about that last email. Looking people in the eye while talking to them (and actually listening). The Digital Diet is ultimately about instilling confidence in you and giving you more control (and, by extension, sanity). It's not a "digital fast" it's about indulging in a healthy manner, not unlike food. No one is forcing you to become so overloaded and overwhelmed. There is a way forward and the answers are literally in the palm of your hands.

Please now repeat after me these Digital Diet rules to live by:

I will not create tech turds by dumping my smartphone on the table at a restaurant or during a social outing unless there's a pending emergency or I make reference to why it needs to be there.

I will choose the human or the device. If someone is talking to me I will do my best to listen to them by putting my gadget aside for a brief time.

I will live my life in the real world. It can be wonderful to learn more about the lives of my friends and family members through social networks but I won't let the screen become my only

connection.

And I will not be afraid to call out those people in my life who are burying their heads in technology too often. I will take a stand. But I need to be just as prepared to have others tell me the same thing.

Finally, consider this tale of technology woe. Recently a senior television executive told me that her five-year-old son was suffering night terrors. One night, she went into his room to comfort him, patting his head and soothing with gentle words. In his sleep, her son uttered this: “Mommy, mommy, put your BlackBerry down. Put your BlackBerry down.” If that’s not a wake-up call for all of us then I don’t know what is.

Daniel Sieberg is the author of “[The Digital Diet: the four-step plan to break your tech addiction and regain balance in your life](#)” He will be speaking at the LSE tonight. For more event details [click here](#).

This post was originally posted on the LSE British Politics and Policy blog and can be found [here](#).

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